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BAYSHORE BOULEVARD: A BRIEF LOOK AT ITS HISTORIC PAST

By CHARLES A. BROWN



Heavy traffic on Bayshore Boulevard at South Dakota Avenue, 1922

Photo courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough
County Public Library System

In the early 1800's Cuban fishermen reaped bountiful catches of fish on a seasonal basis in the waters adjacent to what we know as Bayshore Boulevard.¹ They were the first known inhabitants of this area for they camped out overnight on the shores after their long days of strenuous labor. In 1824 the U.S. Army founded Fort Brooke. This founding eventually led to the incorporation of Tampa in 1855. In 1890, the population of our city was slightly over 5000 people. During this time period Mr. and Mrs. Chester W. Chapin, who were a wealthy family originating from New York, were looking for a winter home in the south. They purchased 110 acres of property three miles south of the city limits of Tampa. This parcel of land included, what we know as today, a part of Bayshore Boulevard. Below

is an excerpt from a May 21, 1891 interview with Mrs. Chapin published in the *Tampa Journal*.

Mrs. Chester W. Chapin of New York returned here Saturday night to look after the work on her beautiful bay place. Just off the point of her property an old Spanish fishing boat was wrecked several years ago and has crumbled to the waters edge. About its hull the oysters have bedded themselves until now there are great beds of them. There is no better fishing than around the point. Mrs. Chapin was seen recently by a *Journal* reporter who was pleased to find her a great enthusiast about Tampa.

If the Tampa people will only take hold and work, this will be the health resort of the world. I have traveled all through the states and Europe but I have never seen a climate to compare with it.²

Mr. and Mrs. Chapin played a major part in the development of Bayshore and Tampa in the 1890's. They formed the Consumers Electric Light and Power Company in 1892. This company developed a trolley car system that provided service from downtown Tampa to Ballast Point Park. They also helped build the Ballast Point Pavilion which became the place for Tampa residents to be on Sunday afternoons. As the 1890's progressed the Chapins started a new project to generate additional electricity for their company. Mr. Chapin began construction of a dam on the Hillsborough River in 1896. He enlisted his nephew, Fred



Mrs. Chapin and her private streetcar *Fair Florida*

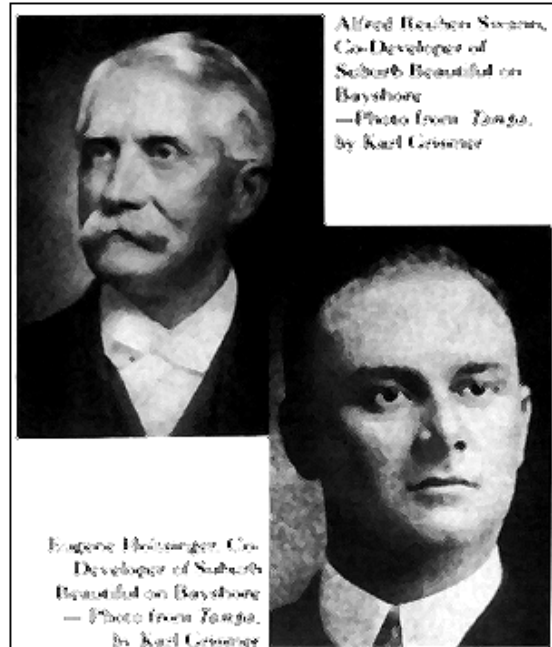
- Photo from *Tampa: The Treasure City*, by Gary Mormino and Tony Pizzo

E. Fletcher, to be the superintendent of this project.³ It was completed in 1897. In 1898 tragedy struck. Local cattle barons, who did not want their properties along the Hillsborough River flooded, blew up the entire dam. After the destruction of this major investment, the Chapins became disenchanted with Tampa. In 1899 their holdings in this company were sold to the Tampa Electric Light and Power Company.⁴ Shortly after this transaction, the Chapins left Tampa and never returned.

The next major project that helped in the development of Bayshore Boulevard was the dream of Colonel Alfred Swann and Eugene Holtsinger. Col. Swann was a wealthy Tennessean and Civil War hero. Eugene Holtsinger also was a native of Tennessee and a very brilliant young attorney. Together, they formed the Swann and

Alfred Reuben Swann, Co-Developer of Suburb Beautiful on Bayshore

-Photo from *Tampa*, by Karl Grismer



Eugene Holtsinger, Co-Developer of Suburb Beautiful on Bayshore

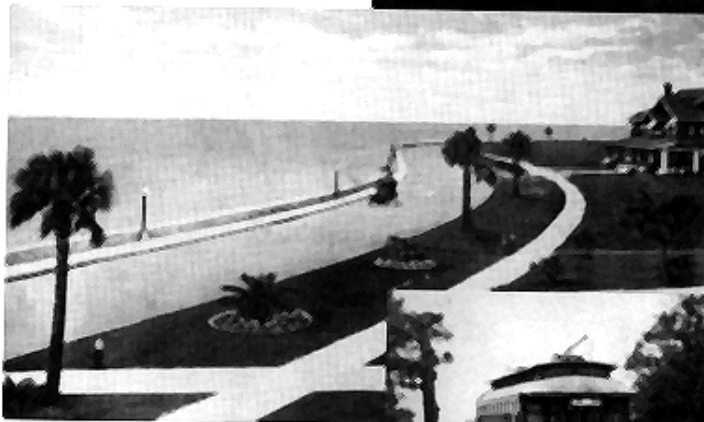
- Photo from *Tampa*, by Karl Grismer

Holtsinger Company in 1906.⁵ They purchased a large tract of land along Bayshore to Hyde Park Avenue which became known as Suburb Beautiful. Swann and Holtsinger began to fill in their swampy property that once was a paradise for fiddler crabs. Their first dredge, nicknamed *Holtsinger* pumped sand 24 hours a day out of Tampa Bay so that new construction of their project could continue at a rapid pace. The main contribution that these two investors gave to the history of Bayshore was a picturesque street with lighting along the seawall which helped connect downtown Tampa to the county road along Bayshore. Other prominent pioneers who helped further develop this historic boulevard were the Biglow and Trousdale families.



Tampa Electric trolley car on Bayshore Boulevard, 1920
- Photo courtesy of Tampa Hillsborough County Public Library System

Boat racers by Bayshore at the corner of South Dakota, 1920
- Photo courtesy of Tampa Hillsborough County Public Library System



Bayshore in the 1920s. Notice the low seawall and street lights
- Photo courtesy of University of South Florida Special Collections

Damage on Bayshore after October 25, 1921 hurricane
- Photo courtesy of Tampa Hillsborough County Public Library System



Tampa Electric trolley car on Bayshore Boulevard, 1920

- Photo courtesy of Tampa Hillsborough County Public Library System

Boat racers by Bayshore at the corner of South Dakota, 1920

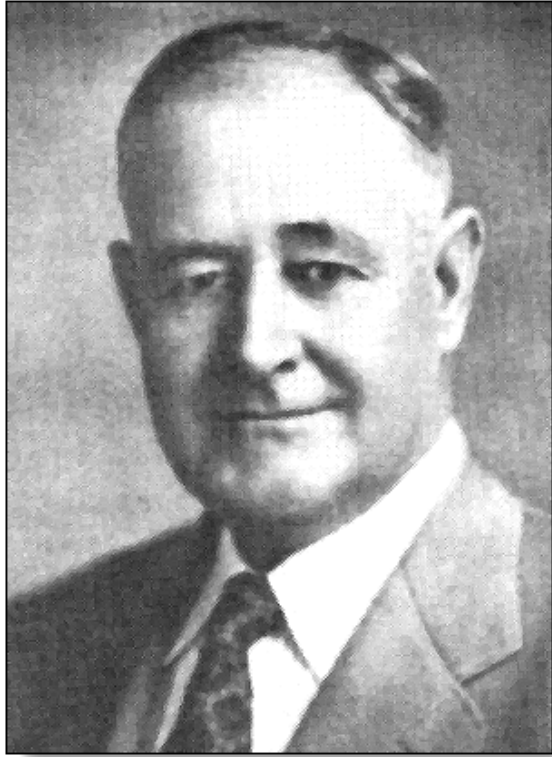
- Photo courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

Bayshore in the 1920s. Notice the low seawall and street lights.

- Photo courtesy of University of South Florida Special Collections

Damage on Bayshore after October 25, 1921 hurricane.

- Photo courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System



Mayor R. E. L. Chancey was instrumental in procuring WPA funds which helped development of the City.

- Photo from For Tampa's 100,000, Tampa Historical Society Collection

In 1908 Mr. Biglow purchased a large tract of land that today is located at the corner of Bayshore and Gandy Boulevards. He built a spacious mansion and lived there until his death in 1917. His widow sold this property to Dr. John Helms. For a brief period of time this home was not only a doctor's office, but also a hosp Ital. Mr. Trousdale, who was the general manager of the Florida Brewery purchased and built a home Just north of the Biglow mansion on Bayshore Boulevard shortly after the Biglow family finished their home. Surrounded by 18 acres of property, it was known as one of the most unique properties on the Bayshore.⁶

In 1914, all the roads and unoccupied property south of Howard Avenue were a



Aerial view of Bayshore and the Municipal Hospital, 1938

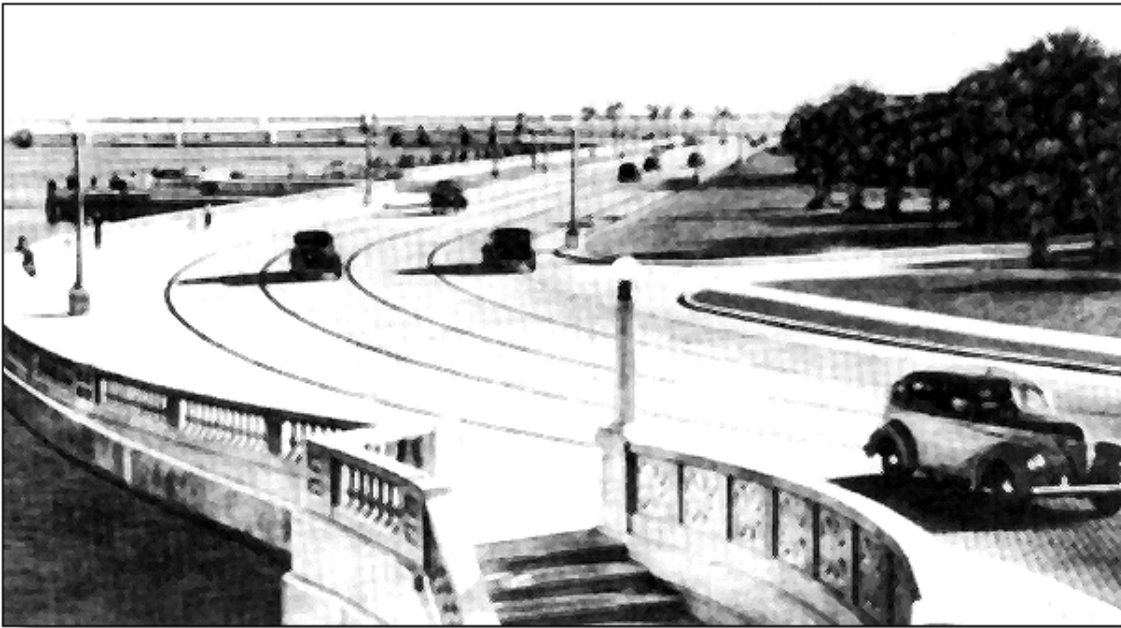
- Photo from For Tampa's 100,000, Tampa Historical Society Collection



Workers putting the finishing touches on the landscape after major restoration of Bayshore, 1938.

- Photo from For Tampa's 100,000, Tampa Historical Society Collection

part of Hillsborough County. The County added to the development of Bayshore by building a two-lane brick road that was 3.12 miles long. In this same time period, the mayor of Tampa, D.B. McKay, helped push through a bond issue that created additional improvements to the Bayshore.



East entrance to Bayshore Boulevard at the Platt Street Bridge.

- Photo from University of South Florida Special Collections

A major setback occurred to Bayshore Boulevard on October 25, 1921. A hurricane, packed with devastating winds and rain, proceeded into the mouth of Tampa Bay and struck directly into the heart of downtown Tampa. This hurricane damaged many homes along Bayshore, and destroyed most of the seawall, and the trolley car track that connected with downtown Tampa. It took more than four years to rebuild the area damaged by this storm.

In the 1930's, the Works Progress Administration created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt helped promote jobs in local communities and develop projects in cities that enhanced the quality of life. Our Mayor at that time, Robert E.L. Chancey, enlisted the help of the managing editor of two Tampa newspapers, Mr. Jerry McCleod, to go to Jacksonville, Florida, (the headquarters for the WTA. in Florida) to solicit funds to help our community. Thanks

to his efforts many important projects were funded.⁷ The development of Peter O. Knight Airport, the construction of the first black hospital, restoration on the H.B. Plant Hotel, and a major renovation to Bayshore Boulevard were just a few of the projects that were completed with these funds. Mr. G.B. Philpott was the construction foreman for the Bayshore project. The major renovation of Bayshore Boulevard began in 1935 and was completed in 1938. A major celebration occurred to commemorate the completion of this project.

In 1946 the trolley car system that had provided service along the Bayshore since the 1890s was eliminated. As you travel down Bayshore Boulevard today, you can still see the remnants of the trolley car track in the center median.

In 1953, the city annexed all of the property south of Howard Avenue from Hillsborough County.⁸ The appearance of Bayshore

began to change in the 1960s with high rise developments replacing many of the single family residential homes. There are still approximately 90 single residential homes located on Bayshore Boulevard from the Platt Street Bridge to Gandy Boulevard.

In October 1989, Mayor Sandra Freedman approved a contract to replace the balustrade, create a bicycle path, a jogging and running course, a physical fitness area, and additional improvements to the road, landscape, lighting, and sidewalks adjacent to this beautiful scenic highway.⁹ These improvements are currently being enjoyed by our entire community. As you travel today down this historic boulevard, you have the unique opportunity to view the longest continuous sidewalk in the world, and enjoy the many scenes of this panoramic Boulevard's past.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Tampa Tribune*, August 12, 1973.

² *Tampa Journal*, May 21, 1891.

³ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 309, 357. The company's full name was The Consumers Electric Light and Street Railway Company.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 214, 309, 357.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 235, 381.

⁶ *Tampa Tribune*, March 7, 1994.

⁷ Interview with Jerry McCleod by author, 1993.

⁸ City of Tampa Archives, 1953 collection.

⁹ *Tampa Tribune*, October 1989.